

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 269

FL 016 435

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TITLE Academic Alliances: Should You Be a Member of a Teacher Collaborative?
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Literatures (10th, Youngstown, OH, October 24-25, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; *Cooperative Planning; Educational Improvement; Educational Trends; Higher Education; *Language Teachers; Networks; Professional Development; Second Language Instruction; *Teacher Associations; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Academic Alliances; *Ohio University

ABSTRACT

A discussion of the academic alliance movement in foreign languages, in which regional and local groups are formed for the support and promotion of language teachers and programs, is presented. The first section presents a brief general history of the movement, describes the development of the Ohio Valley Foreign Language Alliance at Ohio University, and gives some suggestions about the mechanics of creating an alliance group. The second section supplies examples of the benefits of alliance participation from a college teacher's point of view. The third section describes the advantages of a collaborative from the perspective of a high school language teacher. (MSE)

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ACADEMIC ALLIANCES: SHOULD YOU BE A MEMBER OF
A TEACHER COLLABORATIVE?

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Delivered at the 10th Annual Conference on the Teaching of
Foreign Languages and Literatures
(October 24-25, 1986 in Youngstown, Ohio)

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ACADEMIC ALLIANCES: SHOULD YOU BE A MEMBER OF
A TEACHER COLLABORATIVE?

In the spirit of today's topic, our presentation¹ will be a collaborative effort by three language teachers: Barry Thomas, Professor of German at Ohio University and director of the Ohio Valley Foreign Language Alliance (OVFLA); Lois Vines, Associate Professor of French at Ohio University; and Barbara Reichenbach, French and Spanish teacher at Nelsonville-York High School, Nelsonville, Ohio. We will offer reasons why we believe the answer to the question posed above is a clear "Yes".

The presentation will be divided into three parts:

- I. A brief history of the Academic Alliance movement in general; the development of the OVFLA at Ohio University; some suggestions about the mechanics of creating an alliance group. (Thomas)
- II. Examples of the benefits from a college teacher's point of view. (Vines)
- III. Advantages of a collaborative from a high school teacher's perspective. (Reichenbach)

* * *

I. Academic Alliances in Foreign Languages and Literatures is the outgrowth of a national project originally funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Exxon Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Given its rapid and well-documented success² it is hardly necessary to go into detail about the

origins and rise of the Academic Alliance in Foreign Languages and Literatures (AAFL) from a pilot project of three collaboratives in 1981 to its present position as a major force in the support and promotion of language teachers and programs across the nation. In 1983, under the initial guidance of Claire Gaudiani of the University of Pennsylvania, and with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Exxon Foundation, some 86 collaborative groups of high school and college foreign language teachers and administrators were formed in over 40 states. Since that time the AAFL, now under the direction of Ellen Silber, Professor of French at Marymount College (Tarrytown, NY 10591), has grown to more than 100 groups with representation in almost every state. The national office recently received a grant from the US Department of Education to fund its activities for another year.

As a natural development of the original foreign language movement, Claire Gaudiani has now created an umbrella organization, Academic Alliances: School/College Faculty Collaboratives, which has been successful in fostering the same kind of collaborative effort among other disciplines.

Purpose: The Alliance movement was conceived as a means of bringing together a natural constituency of language teachers at all levels of education. High school and college instructors have tended in the past to work in relative isolation, to the detriment of themselves, their students, the programs, and the profession. For numerous reasons, but primarily due to a lack of

communication and (it must be admitted) a degree of snobishness, college level faculty have generally not viewed high school teachers as professional colleagues, and in turn high school teachers have perceived college faculty as distant and unconcerned. Given the precarious health of language programs since the hey-day of the sixties, the continuation of these old attitudes is certainly not conducive to reinvigorating the discipline or its practitioners. Despite a certain amount of attention from government study groups and presidential commissions, nothing much is likely to happen unless there is a grassroots movement to break down the barriers between the various levels of language teaching.

The AAFL, with a network of over one hundred collaborative groups across the country, is dedicated to increasing communication between public schools and colleges, promoting the professional development of language teachers, and raising public awareness of the value of language learning for humanities education in general. Like members of other professional groups, members of a foreign language collaborative take collective responsibility for the quality of practice in their profession. Through regular meetings, workshops, and other activities the members strive to:

- 1) Improve the quality of their intellectual and professional lives;
- 2) Improve educational programs at the local level;

3) keep each other informed about recent developments in their field;

4) focus on issues of local, regional, and national concern to the teaching of foreign language, literature, and culture;

5) seek external sources of funding for language programs and projects.

Collaboratives come in all sizes and shapes. Whether small or large, urban or rural, the collaborative exists to serve the needs of its membership. With a steering committee composed of elementary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers and administrators, the collaborative represents the spectrum of professional educators. There is much to be gained from increased cooperation: common goals and concerns are identified and addressed; communication takes place on the basis of long-term relationships rather than in brief encounters at state and national meetings; professional development opportunities are increased; additional visibility and support for language programs and teachers is created in the schools and the community; and since all members of a collaborative contribute their time, effort, and skills, these benefits can be gained in a cost-effective manner.

How these broad goals are achieved varies considerably from group to group, depending on local conditions, needs, and talents. Membership ranges from less than twenty to around 50. Experience has shown that groups in excess of 50 are perhaps too unwieldy to allow for the desired communication among members.

Forming a Group: The actual steps which need to be taken to form a collaborative are described in a document available from Ellen Silber at the above address, so I will only sketch here the steps we found useful in deciding to pursue the formation of a collaborative in our area³:

1) It is important to identify a group of five to ten committed individuals who are willing to devote considerable time to the task of persuading teaching and administrative colleagues to participate, even though these efforts might not result in immediate benefits. It is helpful if these people have a record of cooperation with the various constituencies (high school and college teachers and administrators, for example). This group should prepare a general statement of purpose in anticipation of a meeting of teachers from the area.

2) Don't be afraid to start small. We would have been happy to see ten teachers at our first meeting; to our surprise and delight there were more than thirty.

3) Stress the connection with the national project and the funding sources (NEH, Exxon Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation). Although no or few funds come to the local groups from the national office, these connections will show other potential sources of funding (principals, deans, state offices, private foundations) that you are part of a nationwide movement with a record of success.

4) Develop interest and support among teachers and administrators by offering them what they want and need.

5) How do you know what they want? Ask them! We found it helpful to send a questionnaire to high school teachers in our area to elicit their ideas on the potential usefulness of a collaborative, topics for discussion, their needs and concerns, and the like.

6) Distribute a draft of the collaborative statement to prospective members. This should not only yield some good ideas, but it immediately establishes the notion that everyone is involved at the formative stages of the project. It is critical that an environment of cooperation and collegiality be established right at the beginning of the enterprise. The name of the AAFLC newsletter is Collaborare, and this word is meant to be taken literally: the members must "work together" if the collaborative is to succeed.

What Happens at a Meeting?: This depends very much on the particular needs and wishes of the members. Some of the activities at our meetings have included:

1) mini-workshops by members: for example, on the use of newspapers and TV materials in language classes; and cross-cultural workshops.

2) guest speakers, though not often, since we feel it is important that members contribute as much as possible to the programs.

3) developing a list of companies offering study tours abroad with which our members have had good or bad experiences; this

list is available to others who might be planning a trip with their students.

4) a dinner for high school and college administrators to explain the personal, academic, and career advantages of language study for high school students intending to enter college.

5) a position paper on "Improvements in FL Teaching". All members had an opportunity to contribute ideas to this paper, which was then distributed to school administrators in our region.

6) the development of grant proposals to support and expand the activities of the collaborating colleges and high schools.

7) undoubtedly, the most important activity at our meetings is--TALK! If nothing else came out of our meetings, the opportunity to discuss common problems, goals, challenges, and aspirations would still make the effort worthwhile.

* * *

II. In the early stages of establishing our local collaborative group, we university faculty were very much involved in the organizational tasks that had to be done, such as identifying the foreign language teachers at all levels in our region, preparing a computerized list for mailing labels, reserving facilities for the meetings, seeking funds from our dean to host a lunch for the teachers, and preparing questionnaires for distribution at the first two meetings. After the collaborative group was launched and sailing a relatively steady course, we had time to reflect on

the benefits we at the college level had gained from our efforts. I asked myself: "Why do I look forward to getting up early on Saturday mornings in order to spend most of the day with other foreign language teachers?" Although I don't normally present well-organized responses to questions I ask myself, I shall attempt to do so here. I especially value: 1) the professional and personal relationships with high school teachers and college faculty from our region; 2) the chance to share resources and ideas on teaching techniques; and 3) the participation in creating new professional development opportunities for foreign language teachers. Let me elaborate and give specific examples.

University professors have the reputation of living in an ivory tower, oblivious to what is going on in the "real world". To a certain extent this reputation is deserved, although many faculty members would prefer that it not be so. To overcome this isolation, we must establish regular contact with other levels of our profession and with members of the community who are interested in foreign language study. At conferences, we most often present literary papers and communicate with other inhabitants of the ivory tower, giving a nod of recognition here and there as we greet former students who are now high school or college teachers.

One of the most valuable achievements of our collaborative group has been to provide the opportunity and time for teachers at all levels of foreign language teaching to get to know each

other better. We have established close ties with as many as twenty of our former students who are teaching in our region. During the four years of the collaborative's existence, these student-teacher relationships have been transformed into a collegial relationship as we recognize the similarity of our challenges and work together to develop effective responses. High school teachers have an energy, enthusiasm, and interest in teaching methodology many of my university colleagues would do well to rediscover. I gain from my high school colleagues a renewed sense of vigor for my own beginning and intermediate classes.

We have just begun to explore the use of computers and media technology in foreign language teaching. Whether we teach in high school or college, the value of these tools will depend on our ability to use them in the classroom. At this we are all beginners who have a great deal to learn together. High school teachers are open to innovative teaching techniques and many have already experimented with computers and video in their classes. The collaborative group's role in acquiring resources and offering workshops on their application is essential to the successful integration of the new technologies into our teaching capability.

When funds were made available by the State of Ohio for the improvement of foreign language teaching, we prepared a grant proposal based on the needs already identified by our members. The awarding of a \$40,000 grant to Ohio University, Marietta

College, and Muskingum College was due in large part to the fact that in the collaborative group we already had in place an organized structure through which resources and services could be made available to foreign language teachers at all levels. The grant provides for the purchase of new materials to be housed at the three participating institutions, and provides funds to hire personnel to catalogue the acquisitions and loan them out to high school teachers as needed. Thus, through our collaboration we will all benefit from the resource centers. Many local school districts cannot afford to buy new materials for foreign language programs; expensive videotapes and computer programs would be out of the question, even if limited funds were available. In the spirit of the collaborative, high school teachers are actively participating in the selection of materials to be purchased. One of our recent meetings was devoted to reviewing catalogues and to viewing and working with samples of newly-acquired resources so that teachers can decide what to borrow for their own classroom use. We are also planning to organize workshops on specific video programs in order to learn more about how to make effective use of them.

I find the sharing of resources particularly satisfying for three reasons. First, it is exciting to know that many students in Southeastern Ohio and West Virginia will be brought closer to other cultures through the sights and sounds provided by video. Second, I look forward to working with other teachers as we share ideas on how to make use of these resources. Third, as we

acquire excellent materials which are quite often expensive, it is gratifying to know that many teachers will be able to make use of them. These valuable resources will not simply gather dust on the shelves of a university storeroom, awaiting their occasional use by a limited number of faculty.

In addition to getting to know high school teachers and exchanging resources and teaching ideas with them, I have benefited from the collaborative group's interest in creating new opportunities for professional development. Responses to our questionnaires and discussions with teachers indicated that many of our colleagues wanted to participate in activities that would improve their speaking skills in the target language, update their knowledge of the cultures where these languages are spoken, and introduce new teaching techniques that would be useful in the classroom. Since many teachers cannot afford the time and expense required to go abroad in the summer, we saw an opportunity to create a foreign language immersion program close to home that would bring in native speakers from the target cultures. In order to meet these needs, I proposed inviting high school teachers of English from France to come to Ohio University for a live-in workshop with high school teachers of French from our region of Ohio. Together we would explore the use of media technology and creative communication in the classroom. Our goal was to establish partner schools in both countries so that teachers and students could communicate through the use of audio

and video tapes, some of which the participants would create themselves.

With the enthusiastic support of the high school French teachers in our collaborative group, I prepared a formal proposal entitled "Teachers Helping Teachers: Using Media Technology to Improve Foreign Language Skills and Cultural Knowledge." The project was awarded a \$5,340 grant from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, an Ohio organization that supports public education. In June 1986 five teachers from France and eighteen from Ohio participated in an immersion weekend, speaking French intensively while they explored teaching techniques and made plans to exchange various types of communication among French and American students. During the workshop, the Ohio teachers became well-acquainted with each other, and they continue to exchange materials and ideas among themselves. After the immersion weekend, the visiting teachers spent five days in the homes of their American colleagues, where they had an opportunity to perfect their English and learn more about American culture. When the teachers from France returned home, they established links between their colleagues and all the Ohio workshop participants. The "Teachers Helping Teachers" concept is a continuing success: teachers exchange pedagogical materials, students communicate in both French and English, two Ohio teachers have visited colleagues in France, and plans are underway to hold an immersion workshop in France with the participation of Ohio teachers.

Professional development opportunities of this type, provided at the local level, are very much needed if we are to improve the quality of foreign language instruction. In our collaborative 85% of the participants are women, many of whom have family obligations which prevent them from taking part in study abroad programs, fellowships, and institutes. For teachers who want to improve their skills but cannot make a four to eight week commitment in the summer, immersion weekends with native speakers--followed by workshops throughout the academic year--provide a format for professional development that is both accessible and affordable.

My participation in the "Teachers Helping Teachers" project has put me in touch with colleagues at the University of Toulouse, who helped select the outstanding teachers of English involved in the program. I exchange materials with both high school and university colleagues in France and look forward to visiting them. The extension of collaborative group activities to include foreign language teachers in other countries offers exciting opportunities for the future.

* * *

III. Being the only foreign language teacher in a small rural high school easily creates a feeling of isolation. There are no colleagues with whom one can discuss the latest methodologies. The community has few resources that can be utilized by the teacher of foreign languages. Activities like athletics and band

usually have strong community support but the academic programs are generally ignored. Faced with these realities, the one-person language department in the rural high school is often desperate for help, attention and interaction.

Fortunately, the Ohio Valley Foreign Language Alliance was formed to serve the needs of these teachers as well as others. Through this association, teachers from the junior high, high school and university have met regularly to share ideas, discuss problems, converse, commiserate and socialize. The benefits have been numerous: to the teachers, to the students, to the educational institutions and to the community.

At meetings, presentations with topics ranging from use of video equipment in the classroom to hints for successful student trips have helped the teachers to organize and plan their programs more effectively. New publications, video materials and computer programs are previewed and presented to the teachers along with ideas for implementation in the classroom. Information regarding grants, fellowships, scholarships, study programs and the like has been discussed and distributed to the teachers in the collaborative. Participating universities have developed programs to enable high school language teachers to pursue graduate studies while teaching beginning college classes. The "Teachers Helping Teachers" immersion workshop gave high school teachers the opportunity to perfect our spoken French and establish lines of communication between our students and their peers in France who are also struggling to learn a foreign

language. We are currently working on a proposal that will create a similar program for Spanish teachers.

During one presentation, a speaker from the Ohio Valley International Council informed participants about a speakers' bureau which she coordinates for the use of area schools. International students are available to visit schools to discuss the cultural aspects of their countries. This program offers schools an inexpensive means of expanding the international awareness of language as well as non-language students.

With increased access to information concerning grants and fellowships, many teachers in the OVFLA have been encouraged to apply for these funds. However, due to a lack of experience and knowledge, most teachers were reluctant to apply for their first grant. To assist these teachers, the collaborative arranged for an expert in the field of grant-writing to present a mini-workshop to those who were interested. As a result, more applicants from the area have applied for the Rockefeller stipends and similar grants.

One of the important functions of the collaborative has been to provide a forum for discussion of common problems and complaints of the foreign language teachers. However, simply airing these concerns did little to resolve the problems. Therefore, the development of a position paper was proposed and carried out at a later meeting. The final draft was adopted by the members of the OVFLA and copies were distributed to educators around the state. Many teachers forwarded this information to

their principal, curriculum director and superintendent in the hope of enlightening administrators about some of the special problems of the language teacher. There have been several subsequent reports of efforts to correct existing problems in the classroom (eg. class size, double-levels, etc.).

A common complaint among high school teachers is the lack of funds for academic resources while expenditures for athletics and other outside activities seem readily available. The resource centers mentioned above will provide invaluable help in obtaining up-to-date materials for use in our classrooms; we will be able to borrow needed materials and, with the opportunity to preview many programs and items, we can select more wisely those we might purchase should local funds become available.

Through the increased professional development opportunities for teachers, language students have of course benefited indirectly. However, many opportunities have also been made available to these students through the collaborative: a summer language camp, an annual language fair, summer institutes, intensive weekend programs and scholarships. Some of these programs were in existence before the OVFLA was established, but the communication network has provided greater awareness of the activities. Suggestions for improving the existing programs and for development of new activities have come from the membership of the collaborative. Through grant money, scholarships to the annual Language Camp have been provided for many of the students of member teachers.

Thus, one can see that formerly isolated foreign language teachers have found a forum to share concerns, to learn about professional activities, to develop ideas and to acquire useful materials. Their students have also been given opportunities to encourage their study of the foreign language and to continue their education in this field. The Ohio Valley Foreign Language Alliance, through the efforts of the participating institutions, has been the stimulus for this increased activity.

* * *

Since our efforts at collegial collaboration are meant to be continuing ones, this report offers no specific conclusion. Some of our most pressing needs have been met, others remain to be dealt with. However, based on our experience of the past four years we can say with some confidence that the effort has been worthwhile and beneficial for the vast majority of participants, and we look forward to increased benefits for foreign language teachers, students, and programs in our region.

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NOTES

1. This article is a revised and expanded version of a panel presentation at the 10th Annual Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Youngstown State University, October 24, 1986.
2. ADEL Bulletin, vol. 16, no. 2 (January 1985); The Chronicle of Higher Education, January 7, 1987, pp. 11-13.
3. See also: B. Thomas, "Teachers Helping Teachers: A Foreign Language Collaborative in Southeast Ohio, The OMLTA Journal (1985), pp. 1-7. ED 259 570.